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ABSTRACT

In the beginning stages of their use, modules for reading-methods courses lacked clear definition of purpose, standard format, and organization. Recently, more sophisticated reading modules have been shown to contain the following components: objectives, learning activities, and assessments (pretests and posttests). A set of modules for teaching reading instruction methods to undergraduates at the University of Houston, Texas, achieves established goals in knowledge, performance, and testable results, through a competency-based, field-oriented course that begins on campus and ends in public school classrooms. The modules for this reading course have characteristically "matured," in organization and format, through three revisions. (KS)

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THE MODULE MATURES

by Lee Mountain
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The Module arrived on campus with three minuses. She was nondescript, overweight, and underage. These difficulties were just as troublesome for this new form of instructional material as they would be for any coed.

Being nondescript caused housing problems. Even the librarian didn't know just what to do with the Module. Should she be shelved with textbooks or with pamphlets? Or should the Module be sent to the audiovisual aids department?

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The weight problem was a long-term difficulty for the Module. Her family, the Competency-Based Educators, had stuffed her since birth with such goodies as flow charts, prospectuses, criterion behaviors, and recycles. Now she needed help in removing all that baby fat and trimming down her proportions.

Being underage was also a problem for the Module. She lacked the savoir-faire of mature instructional materials like the Laboratory Manuals. They were familiar faces on campus, well accepted by students and professors. By comparison, this young newcomer, the Module, was a stranger in academe.

Clearly, she needed a "before/after" transformation. So the Module, like many a coed, underwent an identity crisis, lost weight, then was able to make it into the IN crowd, and is now becoming a big name on campus. She has come a long way from her initial status of an unknown nonentity among instructional materials to her present status of a promising contender in the field.

The Identity Crisis

The Module started by asking that classic identity-crisis question, "Who am I?" That question can be reworded or expanded in many ways, such as "What is my heritage? How am I similar to and dissimilar from other teacher-training materials? What is my purpose with regard to reading instruction?" As those questions were answered, the Module's identity began to emerge.

Her heritage? She was an offspring of the competency-based movement in teacher education. The originators of that movement maintained that a teacher's competencies should include knowledge, performance, and results (Howsam, 1972). Knowledge means cognitive mastery of the material to be taught. Performance means the ability to teach that material Results mean that pupils learn the material that is taught.

To live up to this heritage, the Module had to be a form of instructional material that could deliver competencies in the areas of knowledge, performance and results. A reading module on phonics, for example, would need to help an education student establish these three competencies: (1) knowledge -- he knows phonics; (2) performance -- he can teach phonics; and (3) results -- his pupils learn phonics.

This heritage to some degree answered the identity-crisis question about the Module's similarities and dissimilarities with other instructional materials for education students. Traditional textbooks delivered knowledge. Videotapes focused on performance in the classroom. Children's projects pointed up the results of teaching. But Modules had to handle all three -- knowledge, performance, and results. So the Module came to realize that she was different in that she had to do a more extensive job than other instructional materials were expected to do.

It followed, therefore, that in the field of reading, her purpose was to enable education students to develop their reading-instruction competencies in the areas of knowledge, performance and results.

With her identity thereby established in terms of definition and purpose, the Module was ready to move on to her next problem -- getting into shape.

Weight Watching

The Module needed streamlining in much the same way that any Dagwood sandwich needs streamlining. To reduce the sandwich to manageable proportions you have to take out some of the fillings. The Module at one time or another had all these fillings -- prerequisites, introductions, rationales, preassessments, behavioral objectives, entering behaviors, flow charts, learning experiences, enabling activities, mastery alternatives, check points, postassessments, ad infinitum. Obviously, the poor Module had bulges where she should have had curves.

The journey from buxom to svelte is arduous, even for instructional materials. This journey was especially difficult for the Module since even the experts differed on her potentially ideal dimensions. Sartain (1972), Houston (1972), and Arends (1973) proposed varying formats that ranged from seven to three parts for the module's basic format. The absolutely essential parts common to all of these formats were these three -- the objective, the learning activities, and the assessments (pretest and posttest).

This three-part format would require the Module to be as slim as a fashion model for a size 8 dress. But as soon as the Module reduced to a presentable size 14, good things started happening.

Joining the IN Crowd

All the while that the Module had been establishing her identity and trimming down her proportions, she had been admiring from afar those mature and well-developed instructional materials, the Laboratory Manuals. They belonged to the IN crowd, and she had much in common with them. They were doing her thing -- but with polished style and professional ease.

The Chemistry Lab Manual, for example, delivered chemistry competencies in the areas of knowledge, performance, and results, just as the Module tried to do for education. In chemistry, knowledge meant understanding the theory. Performance meant doing the experiment. Results meant producing the right quantity or product. A chemistry student could just fill in the blanks in his lab manual and thereby give his professor quite a bit of data regarding his competencies. The Module wished she could equal the Chemistry Lab Manual's simplicity of design and efficiency of operation.

By comparison she still felt fragmented and amateurish. She was every instructor's do-it-yourself project. To achieve her potential, she needed the kind of professional help that teams of writers and editors had given to other instructional materials.

Then came the Module's big break. The teams of writers materialized! At one university after another, faculty teams started restructuring their courses as they moved toward competency-based programs. The Module was the instructional unit they needed, so the Module got lots of attention.

Consider, for example, what happened at the College of Education of the University of Houston. The faculty team who taught the reading methods course kept revising and rewriting module material, semester after semester. Finally they arrived at a set of modules that did the job for their competency-based, field-oriented course (Olson, 1973).

To some extent these modules are a combination textbook and lab manual. They provide a cognitive base for reading instruction. They structure conditions for the education students to perform instructional tasks with children. And these modules also build in assessment of results according to specified criteria.

They approach the development of competencies in the areas of knowledge, performance, and results through a two-part course structure. The first part of the course is campus-based. During this first half, students develop knowledge competencies through readings from texts, audio-visual materials, lectures, and panels. The modules for this part of the course also promote performance competencies through simulations, peer teaching, and videotaping.

In the second half of the course these performance competencies are demonstrated by education students in the "real world" of public school classrooms. Each student performs twelve specified reading-instruction tasks with children. Competencies in the area of results are determined by pupils' evidence and by an assessment team of peers and supervisors.

Performance and results competencies go hand in hand when the education students' work on the field-experiences module. During this module they perform such tasks as teaching a basal reader lesson, administering an informal reading inventory, conducting a reading conference, reinforcing a specific reading skill, selecting a book for a child, evaluating and reporting reading progress, diagnosing specific difficulties, and making a book with a child. The teaching is done and the results are assessed in a real classroom situation. This field-experiences module closely resembles a lab manual in that the education student can fill in the blanks and thereby give his supervisor a good bit of data regarding his competencies.

The modules for the reading methods course at the University of Houston have "matured" through three revisions. Their development is typical of that of modules from other schools, such as the University of Pittsburgh, Illinois State University, the University of Missouri, and Michigan State (Duffy, 1973).

So now the Module is blossoming forth on the reading instruction shelves of one college bookstore after another. Now the Module is a member of the IN crowd of instructional materials, and her position is strengthened each time she is rewritten, edited, printed, and bound. Now students of reading instruction can develop their competencies from polished sets of modules.

The module has grown up, come of age, and taken her place among accepted instructional materials. Many modular programs are now taking shape in publishing houses. Some look like lab manuals. Some look like kits. Some look like an interesting mixture of educational hardware and software.

But none of them look anything like the nondescript, overweight, underage Module of yesterday.

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